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FOOD SHORTAGES IN THE COMMUNIST BLOC

The major countries of the Communist Bloc continue to have serious food problems, although of widely varying kinds. In China and, to a less serious degree, in North Vietnam food supplies hover around a caloric intake level which provides the bare requirements to sustain life and which are equally hazardous in terms of nutritional requirements. East Germany, near the other end of the spectrum, in caloric terms eats almost as well as does Western Europe. However, chronic inability to provide supplies of quality foodstuffs in quantities desired by the populace and frequent failings in the bureaucratic substitute for a wholesale distribution system keep the population in a state of disgruntlement which occasionally becomes serious enough to cause the regime serious concern over the possibility of public disorder. Largely because of the weather in the USSR and China in the last two years, the various chronic food problems became more severe than usual in the early part of 1961. Spring harvests have widely eased this severity, but it is far from certain that the easing has been other than partial and temporary.

Communist China

With its enormous population, large but intensively farmed agricultural areas, low living standards, and an industry only just beginning its modernization and expansion, Communist China is sorely vulnerable to fluctuations in agricultural output. Persistent food shortages since 1959 reflect the seriousness of China's agricultural difficulties. Bad harvests in 1959 and 1960 were primarily due to unfavorable weather over large areas of the mainland, but official mismanagement and peasant apathy compounded the losses. Grain production in 1960 is believed to have been near the 1957 level, when there were some 50,000,000 fewer people to feed. The resultant short rations and poorly balanced diet brought widespread malnutrition and related health problems, and the regime seems to be faced for the first time with resentment and hostility from a population previously characterized by docility and respect for authority.

Peiping's initial response--in the fall and winter of 1960-61--after two bad harvests was to depress still further the already barely adequate rations of grain and other food-

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stuffs to the population. Grain rations were cut to a slow-starvation level in some areas, and all over China rations of subsidiary foodstuffs such as meat, vegetables, and cooking oil were sharply limited when available. Malnutrition increased markedly, however, with dropsy, beri-beri, and other nutritional ailments apparently reaching epidemic proportions. Characteristic of the testimony of refugees leaving the mainland at that time was the story told by two young but work-weary farmers from neighboring villages in Kwangtung. They said that the ration for a hard-working man was hardly more than half a pound of rice a day, with no supplements, and that one out of every three to four people in their villages suffered swelling of the arms, legs or face, and "after this great weakness came, and for some death." By January 1961, an alarmed regime had permitted a reduction in working hours and the suspension of virtually all after-work political and social activities as stop-gap measures to reduce the population's caloric requirements.

The food situation began to improve somewhat in February and early March, presumably because of the release of government food stocks after sizeable purchases of foreign grain had been made. According to an Indian doctor in Peiping, up to April 1961, additional quantities of foodstuffs--mainly high-protein foods such as bean curd, soybeans, and bean sprouts--began to appear on the market in Peiping around mid-February. By mid-April, this source noticed fewer signs of malnutrition and some improvement in the general physical appearance of the population. (State #820, Hong Kong, 8 May 61, C/ Letters from Amoy and Hoi-pei cite an improvement in the food situation in those cities after February.

A Western diplomat in Peiping has stated that in December and January hospitals there were crowded with patients suffering from malnutrition, but that the situation improved considerably after that time. (State #1885, Hong Kong, 8 Jun 61, C/ Interrogations of recent refugees from Kwangtung and other parts of the mainland reportedly also indicate that signs of malnutrition have now largely disappeared. (State, #181, Hong Kong, 26 May 61, C)

It appears that, for the moment at least, Peiping has brought the problem of malnutrition under control. Contributing factors would be a combination of special medical

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treatment (one refugee from Kwangtung reports that beginning in January special medical teams visited production teams in his locale every 10 days to treat cases of malnutrition)

, exemption from heavy work for those exhibiting symptoms, generally decreased work and more rest, and maintenance of minimum rations for the general population.

Ration levels remain low, however, and the long-run food picture is at best no brighter than at this time last year. The generally weakened condition of the population, especially in rural areas, together with sagging morale could well have a significant impact on farm production in the coming months. The increased activity required during the busy farm season, now well under way, and any drives to increase production could wreak havoc with this balance.

It is still too early to assess crop prospects for 1961 with any degree of confidence. The winter wheat crop in the North--the first important crop of the year--was severely damaged by drought and probably was worse than last year's poor one. In the South, however, harvesting of the first rice crop is now under way and independent weather data plus reports from observers indicate it may be normal to good. Planting of the late crops--which provide the bulk of the annual harvest, has just started. Much will depend on the weather these next two months, and to a lesser but important extent on the attitude of the peasants and the efficiency of the communes which were overhauled last winter. Crop prospects as of the present remain subject to change.

Peiping has had trouble maintaining discipline and diligence in rural areas, however. Few refugees, whether from town or country, have failed to charge local cadres with pilfering, living markedly better than the local populace, or making impossible demands as regards production efforts. Bitter rhymes and slogans mocking the Communists are now frequently reported by refugees.

This disgruntlement has manifested itself in open opposition to authority. Reports of thefts of food from the fields were numerous during the winter. In a village in Kwangtung, for example, pilferage of foodstuffs and livestock had been on the increase from the end of 1960 through March 1961. The authorities reportedly had made little effort to stop it and the farmers had in turn become more and more daring in their stealing.

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Agriculture clearly continues to cause the regime great concern. Chou En-lai reportedly told a group of businessmen in late June that another bad crop is expected this year. (State JW26-61, Kong Kong, 30 Jun 61, C) With some three months still left of the growing season, however, the regime almost certainly does not know what the annual harvest will be, but the remark reflects apprehension that it may be bad. Official weather releases have emphasized bad weather, not only in the North but in some rice areas to the South and Southwest. Independent weather data bears these out to some extent, but it is unclear whether the regime's complaints can be taken at face value.

The food situation on the mainland remains serious, and prospects for the immediate future hold little promise of significant improvement. Ration levels remain barely adequate to maintain strength if not health. Peiping's earlier hopes for making some recovery with a good early crop appear to have been dashed, certainly in the North. Conditions in Central and Southern China may ease, however, with the first rice crop beginning to reach the markets there. If later harvests are not at least normal to good, the regime will continue in the grip of a relentless cycle of substandard rations, reduced energy among the population, lower productivity on the farm and in the factory, and less chance in turn of any marked improvement in rations.

North Vietnam

North Vietnam experienced serious food shortages in the spring of 1961 in the wake of a poor harvest the previous year. One observer in Hanoi reported in late May having seen people--even school children--fainting on the street from undernourishment, and Ho Chi Minh himself reportedly apologized to the diplomatic corps for having to endure shortages. (State, Bangkok 2128, 25 May 61, C) The shortages early this year were due primarily to bad weather affecting last year's crop, but stepped-up socialization drives in the rural areas contributed to the shortfalls. Prolonged drought damaged last year's spring harvest, and floods and insects affected the fall harvest, bringing food production to 14 percent below the level of the previous year.

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Per capita consumption of food in North Vietnam this spring was estimated to be the lowest since 1957, with per capita food availability considerably below prewar levels. The food situation is normally tight during the spring months, when stocks from the previous year are running low and the next harvest not yet in. The shortages this spring are believed to have been much more serious than usual, however. The North Vietnamese government admitted the seriousness of the situation in a communique published on 14 May. Lamenting the state of agriculture and admitting that insufficient attention had been given to the food problem, the communique sought to enlist popular cooperation by promising the peasants they could retain or sell privately the grain produced in excess of government quotas.

The crisis appears to have been weathered, however, and prospects for this year's harvest are good. Hanoi has expressed optimism, and there have been no reports of bad weather thus far. This year's early harvest is believed to have been considerably better than last year's, and acreage of summer crops has been expanded--more than doubled for corn and sweet potatoes. If normal to good weather conditions prevail, total grain production in 1961 may reach 5 million tons, as good as the previous record set in 1959 and well above last year's 4 million tons.

Such positive factors as better growing conditions and expanded acreage must be weighed against peasant attitudes, however. Peasant disgruntlement over the regime's heavy-handed efforts at collectivization reached serious proportions in 1960, flaring into open opposition in the wake of the year-end food shortages. In one instance, farmers reportedly killed the local commissar, burned food warehouses, and then prevented firemen from putting out the fires. Letters have appeared in the local press complaining about inadequate rations and black marketing, and even articles claiming peasants were resisting taxes and grain sales to the state. (State, Bangkok 2128, 25 May 61, C) The regime may continue to encounter problems if it insists on further reforms in rural areas, where collectivization is bringing considerable resistance from the peasants.

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North Korea

Unlike its two Asian Bloc companions, North Korea has evidently not been troubled to any serious extent by food difficulties in the past two years. A watered-down facsimile of Communist China's Leap Forward program for agriculture was adopted in North Korea in late 1958 and, as in China, brought grain output in 1959 to the lowest level in recent years. Although definitive information is admittedly limited, food imports and a small population long used to meager fare apparently enabled the regime to get through the following winter and spring without appreciable discontent. Policy reversals plus favorable weather in 1960 combined to produce what may have been a record grain harvest in 1960, estimated at about 3.6 million tons. Weather conditions so far this year have been favorable, and no disruptive organizational experiments appear to have been undertaken in rural areas. Prospects appear good for the 1961 crop, and it may reach or exceed slightly the record tonnage brought in last year.

Mountainous terrain, saline and low fertility soils, and a relatively short growing season combine to limit North Korea's agricultural potential. Priority is being accorded to mechanization programs, and the regime is devoting increased attention to the use of chemical fertilizers. There is probably some margin for increasing agricultural output relative to past levels, but North Korea will never be a significant producer of foodstuffs. Its economy is geared to industrial development, for which it is geologically and topographically suited, and progress with industrialization programs should make possible the minimum satisfaction of food wants from domestic production or imports. The North Korean diet for the present, however, remains low-calorie, monotonous, but adequate.

USSR

Unlike Communist China the USSR is not fighting a nip-and-tuck battle with widespread malnutrition, nor has it been for many years. Rather, the Soviet food industry is faced with two problems: How to increase the quality of a predominantly "bread and potatoes" diet and how to realize the unrealistic goals set by Moscow. In contrast to the poor 1959 and 1960 harvests prospects thus far this year look good.

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Soviet agricultural production under the influence of good weather and Khrushchev's agricultural programs increased about 50 percent from 1953 to 1958. Today, though production failed to increase during the past two years, the caloric intake of the average Soviet is roughly equivalent to his counterpart in the US. Over 70 percent of the Soviet caloric intake, however, consists of grain and potatoes. Further, the fact that there has been statistical manipulation by farm officials and rural administrators--Khrushchev has decried such practices in recent speeches--casts doubt on all agricultural records and suggests that this 70 percent may be a low estimate. In 1957 Khrushchev called for the impossible--to match US production per capita in milk and butter by 1958 and meat by 1960-61. More recently Khrushchev called agriculture to surpass the US per capita by 1965 and the Seven-Year Plan goals were based on this desire. Following the first two years of the Seven-Year Plan, which saw Soviet agricultural production still at the 1958 level, preparations--probably as elaborate as any in Soviet history--were made for the 1961 season. The agricultural plenum in January, which decreed a major agricultural reorganization and made fulsome promises to raise agriculture's low priority, also revealed that two successive poor harvests had taken significant toll. For example, on 17 January Khrushchev admitted that millions of sheep were lost from disease and malnutrition during the preceding season but rather weakly reiterated his belief that the USSR could overtake the US in per capita production in five years...if "the work can be organized." In April the Soviet Statistical Bureau revealed that meat production at the State slaughter houses had dropped 13 percent over the same period last year. While this figure is misleading--total production in 1959 and 1960 was above that of 1958 and in the first quarter 1959 production was unusually heavy--there have been plenty of signs that many cities this past winter and spring experienced shortages of livestock products.

March reported shortages in Yaroslavl and Westerners with relatives in Simferopol received pleas for food parcels.

A joke floated around MOSCOW: Kuda, da; Myasa, nyet (Cuba's on, meat's off).

On 4 April the newspaper Soviet Russia reported that the livestock situation was deteriorating in a number of areas and that meat and milk production was "significantly less than last year." On 27 April the Soviet farm newspaper reported that mass slaughtering of young calves was causing "irreparable damage to Soviet cattle breeding." As late as 6 May Khrushchev

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told the Georgians "before I stop talking about it you've got to stop doing your sheep in..." From Astrakhan it was reported that there were periodic absences of bread and milk during May and June and that no meat and little fish was available from 28 April to 8 June--resulting in much open criticism of Khrushchev.

A visitor to Khabarovsk late in May reported that the central market had only small amounts of garlic and onion greens, potatoes, fish, entrails, and beer. Restaurants had only bread, beer, and ersatz meat.

This latter calls to mind the Soviet cartoon published recently in which a waiter is asking "how do you like your cutlet" and the customer answers "With meat." A distinguished American visitor to Moscow was told a party secretary in Tambov Oblast had committed suicide because of the poor food conditions there. (State, 19 Jun 61.

Prospects for Soviet agriculture in 1961 appear better than average. An unusually mild winter and a favorable spring should assure a good winter grain crop in the European USSR, and larger herds and better feed supplies point to a somewhat better year for the livestock industry than 1960. Prospects for spring sown grain, however, are still uncertain, particularly in the important New Lands area where soil moisture reserves are low. Weather during the remainder of the growing season will be a critical factor.

Despite the favorable signs, the regime is "running scared." Soviet newspapers continue to focus attention on agricultural needs and are critical of the apparently slow progress being made in the reorganization. Everywhere in the press there is the note of caution against over-optimism.

Given a successful year the regime still faces the problems created by fundamental weaknesses in their agricultural venture--low priority for agriculture relative to industry, severe natural restrictions, and doctrinal biases. Soviet agriculture has plenty of capability for improvement and the future will see improvements in the Soviet diet. But as the average Soviet citizen comes to expect more--and the regime, particularly Khrushchev, has led him to expect more--he complains more and is less complacent when local shortages occur, however, temporary, as happened in the spring. The regime, in turn, will be

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faced with the realization that paper competitions with the West are not quite the same thing as food on the table. Khrushchev, in his speech to military academy graduates on 8 July, after giving in great detail his views of the manner and timing of the USSR's race to surpass US industry, hedged on the agricultural competition with the mild statement that "we could quote similar figures with regard to the prospects of agricultural development on our two countries...." It is to his credit that he didn't try.

European Satellites

East Germany and Czechoslovakia are the only European Satellites which admit to difficulties with food supplies. However, Poland had meat and dairy products shortages which it solves in 1959/60 by allowing market operations to set the price level, and meat shortages have been reported recently in Bulgaria and in Hungary. These shortages, like those in the USSR, are not significant from a nutritional point of view. In terms of the effect on populations, however, the food shortages in Eastern Europe are more significant than those in the USSR.

Difficulties in meeting the demands for quality foodstuffs in East Germany are so apparent that they are openly admitted. On 25 June, K. H. Gerstner of the press office of the GDR Council of Ministers flatly admitted that "demand cannot be met fully for all foodstuffs and industrial goods." Earlier, local officials had made many similar admissions. On 16 June the Schwerin area Communist Party Secretary reportedly blamed inadequate feed supplies for "plan lags in 1961...in milk and meat." On 23 June a Leipzig paper reported that the party secretary for that area had explained to a local meeting the reasons for the food shortages, particularly butter.

More recently, the problem and its solution have been discussed on a national level. On 10 July, the 13th plenary meeting of the GDR Communist Party was told that "it is only possible to import consumer goods and foodstuffs on the scale to which goods can be exported in exchange" and that

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"a further increase outside the plan in the import of butter and meat is impossible." Additionally, while the East German regime still resorts to a sort of legalistic charade to deny that rationing is now necessary and practiced, on 7 July Paul Verner, Communist Party Secretary for East Berlin was reported by the official East German press to have said that "it is planned to provide potato rationing cards bearing the (particular) store's stamp and to cut off a small section of the potato rationing card which will remain in the store, enabling the store to have a better control over its circle of steady customers." Possession of the card was also to be the passport to butter purchases.

In Czechoslovakia, the problem is similar to but less severe than that in East Germany, partly because of a less demanding public attitude and partly because of slightly better agricultural conditions. Nevertheless, the regime is concerned about the problem. On 23 March, Lubomir Strougal, a former Minister of Agriculture admitted that "agriculture is not fully satisfying the needs of the people." The journal Nova Svoboda (Ostrava) on 28 May deftly summarized a portion of the problem with the statement that "the greatest worries we have concerning the production of pork are caused by a shortage of pigs." A 3 June review of agricultural problems in Zemelske Noviny blamed shortages in part on production lags--through 1 June output was behind plan by about 6 percent for beef, 12 percent for pork, and 4 percent for milk--and in part on "uneven supply" which is Communist jargon for the inefficient operation of the distribution system.

The unfavorable food supply situation in East Germany and Czechoslovakia stems from peasant apathy following collectivization and from shortages of fodder which have restricted livestock production. Also, however, both Satellites normally import large quantities of meat from other bloc countries and Soviet and Chinese production difficulties in 1960 have reduced such imports from these countries. The number of workers and their incomes have been gradually increasing during the past few years. Much of the increased income has gone into non-food consumer goods, but at the same time demand for animal protein foods has increased. Thus the stagnation in livestock production and inability or unwillingness of the governments sufficiently to increase imports have brought on the current supply difficulties.

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The other Satellites also have had difficulties in improving the availability of livestock products. Poland went through a meat shortage in 1959/60, still has not regained the 1958/59 per-capita level of consumption, but has controlled consumer demand through higher prices. Local shortages of butter occurred in Poland during the first quarter of 1961 due to a drop in milk production and larger exports of butter. Hungary and Bulgaria were reported to have had shortages of meat earlier this year. Hungarian officials stated in March that no improvement could be expected in pork supplies this year. However, in all of these instances meat was exported at the expense of local consumption. These Satellites did not openly admit shortages of food.

Because weather has generally been favorable, crop prospects for the European Satellites in 1961 are good, and early crops are easing, though possibly only temporarily, the food supply problems. Precipitation to date has been ample for good plant growth, although in several cases, particularly in Czechoslovakia and East Germany, rainfall has been too ample. The harvest of small grains (wheat, rye, barley, oats), which began in mid-June in Albania and is moving northward as the season progresses, is expected to exceed both that in 1960 and the average for 1956-60. While prospects for the major fall crops (potatoes, sugar beets, corn) currently appear good, production will depend upon weather in the interim before the harvest.

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